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# Foz Côa and cultural policy decisions in Portugal: the itinerary of a symbol

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Observatório das Actividades Culturais

*These columns are dedicated to topical items, debates and controversial issues.*

The announcement at the end of 1994 of the discovery of Palaeolithic engravings on the construction site of the Foz Côa dam<sup>1</sup> had repercussions at both domestic and international levels and took on a symbolic significance vis-à-vis the changes occurring in Portuguese society. The intense debate on the Foz Côa issue during 1995 confirmed its importance.

Although the importance of the discovery in terms of cultural heritage was not immediately recognised due to the controversy surrounding the dating of the engravings, two opposing stands on the issue emerged within a very short time. The builder of the dam, Electricidade de Portugal (EDP), supported continuation of the construction work and simultaneously proposed that solutions be found that would be compatible with the future of both the dam and the engravings (such as moving the more important engravings to another site). The other stand, taken mainly by the archaeological community then gradually becoming widespread, called for the retention of the engravings on the original site, associating the full protection of the engravings and their relationship to their environment as being essential to heritage development. This led to a call for a halt to the dam construction work.



## Opposing development strategies

Looking at the Foz Côa issue from a more general point of view, the antagonism between the two positions mentioned above stems from the opposition between the proposed development models. At the risk of an oversimplification of the situation – even though one of the crucial aspects of the debate was the diversity of the protagonists, interests and tactics – it could be said that the opposition was between a highly restrictive, economically- and industrially-oriented strategy based on the motivating strategy of the dam, and a more culturally- and locally-oriented strategy based on action aimed at developing the discovered heritage. A further significant difference between the two development principles is that the first stems from the notion of centralised planning

(following on from the water supply policies of the 1950s and 1960s), whereas the second is linked to an approach based on overall regional development with strong local involvement.

On a political level, the two major political parties were opposed: the Social Democrat Party (PSD), in power at the time, supported the EDP position and the construction of the dam; the Socialist Party (PS), which won the Autumn 1995 legislative elections, was against this option. The fact that the debate on Foz Côa occurred during the electoral period certainly helped to highlight the issue. A halt to work on the dam was a significant part of the Socialist Party's platform and became one of the first measures to be adopted by the new government.

Also from a political standpoint, one of the key aspects of the symbolic importance acquired by Foz Côa is linked to the relationship between political decision-making methods and the involvement of civil society. The controversy and the large number of surrounding factors (the opposing stands taken on the rock art by the archaeologists and the EDP on the dam, the discussions on alternative development models involving high-ranking politicians, community groups and

\* See p. 27. The original Portuguese version of this article, under the heading "O caso de Foz Côa: percurso de um símbolo na definição de políticas culturais em Portugal" can be found on the following web site: <http://www.culture.gov.pt/departamentos/catacollec.htm#circulares>  
1. Photographs of the magnificent range of the Foz Côa rock engravings can be seen on the following web site: <http://www.ipa.min-cultura.pt/coa/home/home.html>

local agencies, intensive press coverage, and the publicising of expressed viewpoints) have been perceived as highly untypical of the way Portuguese society normally behaves. In this regard, the decision to halt construction work, which revoked a previous decision, reveals an unusual sensitivity in political decision-making methods towards protests arising from citizen action (also a relatively uncommon phenomenon in Portugal).

### **The importance placed on culture by the government**

A further significant aspect of the process was the recognition of the importance the government placed on culture and science. For culture, it was an assertion that the rock engravings would be protected, which symbolised the radical redefinition of cultural policy following the change in government. This redefinition led to the creation, in 1995, of the Ministry of Culture (during the previous decade, state supervision of culture was the responsibility of a single junior minister), accompanied by a statutory restructuring aimed at increasing the autonomy of the prerogatives and competence of organisations specifically involved with culture in its various spheres. During the creation of the restructuring framework, institutional effects of the Foz Côa issue could be observed. The creation, in 1995, of the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology (IPA) coincided with the autonomisation of archaeology within the Ministry of Culture (vis-à-vis its previous situation under the administration of the Portuguese Architectural and Archaeological Institute – IPPAR).

Under the IPA, the National Rock Art Centre and the Côa Valley Archaeological Park were set up as a new form of regional protection (similar, but not identical to the setting up of national

parks as part of environmental protection policies). These measures – to which can be added the setting up of a body of archaeologists within the civil service – replied to the need to provide cultural policies with mechanisms for legal and regulatory action. Perhaps its main significance, taking into account the fact that the same type of mechanisms were incorporated in the Ministry of Culture's various spheres of action, was the recognition of sector-based considerations in the constitution of cultural policies.

### **Assessments of current action**

Although the Foz Côa affair is linked with the affirmation of cultural policy as an integral part of legally-based government policy, there is much less optimism that this same cultural policy will be a driving force behind an alternative development model to replace strictly economically-based decisions. The anticipated effects of the facilities development programmes associated with the conservation of the rock art<sup>2</sup> are, in fact, still not being felt. The necessary infrastructures are still sadly lacking, particularly when it comes to site access and hotel facilities – both of which are essential to overcome the problems associated with Foz Côa's isolation and difficulty of access for potential visitors. The problems observed in the relationships between the decision makers responsible for the facilities development programmes and local agencies has affected the functioning of amenities and prevented these agencies from fully responding to the expectations generated by the initial debate surrounding the engravings.

More recently (and over the last two years in particular), although the issue has become less publicly visible, there have been many questions raised in connection with the construction of the Côa Valley Art and Archaeological

Museum in the archaeological park. Seen as a key element of the development project, its completion gave way to new guidelines and strategies aimed at attracting visitors. The situation is all the more sensitive as, due to current restrictions on the number of visitors, the 20,000 visitors per year fall far short of the anticipated 200,000 per year. On the one hand, it is said that the museum should be capable of attracting the largest possible number of visitors in order to justify tourist development strategies – the position taken by local actors. On the other hand, priority is being given to the museological aspect of the project, especially by the Ministry of Culture officials responsible for museums.

The issue should also be viewed in the light of two considerations affecting cultural policy decisions that have become increasingly important over the last few years: the will to foster greater participation in cultural activity, and the establishment of a cultural facilities network (this includes the current implementation of a national museum network, promoted by the Portuguese Institute of Museums, which will probably act as supervising authority for the Foz Côa Museum). In this regard, the Foz Côa issue highlights the specific nature of the mechanisms involved in cultural policy decisions.

The process – from when Foz Côa first came into prominence as a symbol to when concrete results could be seen – has been a lengthy one, and is still continuing: it has been prolonged not only by the structural problems associated with the proposed development model, but also, in certain ways, by the particularities of the stands taken and the unfamiliarity of the methods applied.

2. These development programmes make up the Côa Valley Integrated Development Programme and, since 2000, the Côa Integrated Regional Action Plan.